

# the improve groove

The Improve Group Quarterly Newsletter

## Improve Group Corporate Giving Program

By Deborah Goldstein

The Improve Group recently began a Corporate Giving Program. We provide small grants of \$500 to \$1,000 to non-profit organizations for direct program and services needs. We receive applications for these grants in fall and spring, accepting up to 5 grant applications each time. Recently, The Improve Group has provided grants to three non-profit organizations in Minnesota:



**St. Anne's Place** is an emergency housing facility funded by Hennepin County for homeless women and their children and can house up to 16 families. St. Anne's mission is to provide women in crisis or transition with a secure and enriching environment through counseling and support services. The shelter also offers the opportunity to explore options for the future.

The Improve Group provided St. Anne's Place with a grant to purchase children's toys, dolls games and furniture for their

children's play room. Pictured above, a resident enjoys the new toys. For information on how to support St. Anne's Place, please visit <http://www.ascensionplaceinc.org/stannes.html>.



Since 1994, **the Women's Prison Book Project (WPBP)** Since 1994, the Women's Prison Book Project (WPBP) has provided women and transgender-identified persons in prison with free reading materials covering a wide range of topics education and reference (dictionaries, GED, etc.) to fiction, politics, history, law and women's health. WPBP is an all-volunteer, grassroots organization that seeks to build

connections with those behind the walls, and to educate those of us on the outside about the prison and the justice system.

The Improve Group provided WPBP with a grant to purchase blank journals and dictionaries – items that are rarely donated. For information on how to support WPBP, please visit <http://www.prisonactivist.org/wpbp/>.

**Evergreen House** was established in 1977 to support, strengthen and advocate for youth and families in northern Minnesota. Begun as an emergency shelter for runaway, homeless, and high-risk youth and their families, they now offer three core programs and a range of services designed to support youth and families and help youth successfully transition to adulthood. The vast majority of agency services are free to clients.



The Improve Group provided Evergreen House with a grant to purchase materials for a shed. Evergreen House residents built the shed themselves using the donated materials, learning skills along the way. Pictured are some of the residents building their new shed. For information on how to support Evergreen House, please visit <http://www.evergreenhouse.org>.

## Mission Statement is Key to Keeping Program & Organizational Goals Aligned

By Becky Stewart and Sarah Myott

On the final day of the Minnesota Council of Non-Profits conference, hosted lunch conversations were held during the noon hour with participants could choosing from hundreds of topics. Becky Stewart and Sarah Myott of The Improve Group facilitated a table discussion on the topic of "Aligning Organizational Goals and Program Goals". Our table of 8 individuals from across the state included funders, organization directors and program administrators. During the conversation, participants raised an interesting issue: the environment in which they seek support is becoming more "politicized". In this environment, non-profit organizations feel increasing pressure to frame their programs and goals carefully to supporters. In this context, organizations are focusing on their mission to keep supporters engaged, particularly when aspects of their individual programs may not be recognized as important or worthy of service. Organizational representatives also reflected that their mission becomes a touchstone when measuring or validating the importance of individual programs, and when facing funding uncertainty or other instability.

# Celebrations

By Leah Goldstein Moses

The Improve Group has had an informal holiday party for a few years – staff and colleagues getting together to enjoy the season over dinner. This year, to celebrate our new location and all the great relationships we have developed with our clients and colleagues, we decided to host our first annual open house.



An invitation to the party was extended to all of the friends we've made and collaborated with over the last six years. With treats provided by local caterer Linda Savage, we discovered many connections among the guests. The fifteen guests under 10 years old really enjoyed the cookie-making.

In addition to having a good time, we wanted to make the party very special and reflect our ethic of community service. We decided to make a \$25 donation for every person that attended to one of three organizations. When signing our guest book, guests

could decide to which organization they'd like their donation to go. With over 50 guests, we donated \$300 to the American Red Cross, \$575 to the Emergency Food Shelf Network, and \$425 to the Bridge for Runaway Youth.



## Engaging Stakeholders with Evaluation

By Leah Goldstein Moses

When evaluators begin working with an organization, they often have two basic hopes: (1) the evaluation will answer the questions an organization has and (2) the results will be used to improve or change programs.

While evaluation studies usually do answer questions, results don't always lead directly to program changes. Even when the findings are very clear, it is more likely that evaluation will *influence* rather than *determine* decisions in one of the following four ways:

- (1) To provide direction for policies or practice (instrumental use)
- (2) To justify preferences or actions (symbolic use)
- (3) To provide new concepts that help make sense of an existing system (conceptual use)
- (4) To make some programs or services more palatable to funding agencies (imposed use)[1]

However, evaluation studies *can* inspire action if stakeholder engagement is taken seriously. Stakeholders can and should be included during each of the evaluation steps: in planning, collecting data, interpreting and communicating results, and in determining how to use findings.

To engage stakeholders, think about who they are and what action you want them to take. Do you want your clients to be more honest in providing data? Do you want your Board to be able to raise funds more effectively? Do you want your staff to identify and

adopt best practices? Some possibilities to inspire the desired action:

- When planning your evaluation, have staff and Board members identify questions they have about your programs and your organization's impacts
- Have clients participate in data collection by interviewing each other or inviting them to share their story
- Ask your staff members what they think the results mean and how they might use the findings in their work
- Host a workshop for various stakeholders to determine "so what" – now that you have information, what should you do with it?

If you've decided that you want to engage your stakeholders, there is bad news and good news. The bad news is you probably won't be able to just provide an evaluation report to stakeholders and assume that they will do what you want. But the good news is evaluation presents an opportunity to share both responsibilities and benefits, to increase trust and respect, and to reflect your core values as an organization.

[1] Carol Hirschon Weiss, Erin Murphy-Graham, and Sarah Birkeland. *An Alternate Route to Policy Influence: How Evaluations Affect D.A.R.E.* *American Journal of Evaluation* 26: 12-30.

Adapted from *Inspiring Engagement by Collecting and Communicating Results*, first presented by Leah Goldstein Moses and Reid Zimmerman at the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits Annual Conference, November 2005.

**STAFF**

It was an exciting fall at the Improve Group. In September, we welcomed two new staff to our team:

**Sarah Myott** is a new Research Manager. Her experience is in evaluation across multiple areas (including criminal justice, employment and school-based services). Prior to joining us, Sarah was a lead evaluator at the Council on Crime and Justice, where she worked on evaluations of six demonstration projects. Sarah is working on a cross-site evaluation of Minnesota's Safe Schools/Healthy Students grantees and an evaluation of the national Girl Scouts in Detention Centers program for Girl Scouts USA and the Department of Justice. We are grateful for Sarah's perspective and thoughtfulness as we analyze data for these two projects.

**Susan Murphy** is a new Research Assistant. Susan brings strong experience in

education, the arts and event planning, and has coordinated a number of projects in her previous work with Blacklock Nature Sanctuary, The Grand Excursion, Capital New Year, United Arts Council and the World Theater. Susan has been busy over the past few months helping to transcribe interviews, organize project data, and planning our holiday party. We are really enjoying her attention to detail!

**Marian Kimball Eichinger** performed in *When Reason Sleeps*, a new play by Ben Kreikamp first presented at the Minnesota Fringe Festival and with additional showings through November at Bryant Lake Bowl.

**OTHER NEWS**

Our evaluation research of the **Performing Arts Workshop's Artists-in-Schools program** ([www.performingartsworkshop.org](http://www.performingartsworkshop.org)) was accepted for presentation at two conferences. In March, we will be presenting the research at the World

Conference on Arts Education in Lisbon, hosted by the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)** and the Government of Portugal. In April, we will be presenting at the **American Educational Research Association (AERA)** annual meeting in San Francisco. We are looking forward to talking about this program that links artists with classrooms and the impact it has on student achievement, critical thinking in the arts, and behavior.

The Improve Group has a **phone system to donate** if your organization needs one. The system consists of one main/receptionists phone with up to eight possible extensions-seven will be included. The phone can handle up to four lines to avoid missed calls. We have instruction manuals and will be happy to provide some training! Please contact Deborah if interested at 877-IMPRVGP ext. 802 or [deborah@theimprovegroup.com](mailto:deborah@theimprovegroup.com).

**featured client**

**Barb Zandlo Hutchinson is the Community Services Coordinator for the Spring Lake Park School District 16, and the Program Director of the District's Safe Schools Healthy Students (SSHS) federal grant program, the HAVENS Initiative. Through the course of her career with District 16, Barb has applied for and received a number of grants, including two federal ones. She was invited by the federal government to provide input for the 2004 SSHS RFP and has served as a SSHS grant reviewer. Marian Kimball Eichinger asked Barb for insight she could offer organizations thinking about tapping into federal dollars for program funding.**

*MKE: What advice would you give to an organization applying for a federal grant?*

BZH: First and foremost, the organization needs to have a clear vision. Before you pursue any outside funding you need to know where they are headed and what your priorities are. Only then should you look for funding opportunities that can help you achieve your vision. The grant reviewer will be looking for a match between the RFP's criteria and the organization's proposal. With federal grants, the criteria are usually spelled out very specifically. My advice is to address each and every criterion---the grant reviewer is looking for evidence that you meet these. Remember to provide lots of evidence in any federal proposal: you will need to show that your proposed intervention works and that it will meet the need you describe. Finally, don't forget that the key to good grant writing is excellent program planning. Keep an eye on sustainability and involve the

team that will be responsible for implementation in the process. Otherwise, you could be successful at getting the grant, but not at implementing the plan.

*MKE: What are the benefits of receiving a federal grant?*

BZH: I think a federal grant provides a great opportunity for an organization to pursue its vision: I am sold on federal grants. I know that some people shy away from them because of the increased reporting and responsibility. But I believe that the added accountability and oversight gives the organization the impetus to push ahead. Plus, in addition to the funding, there is usually a system of supports with federal grants. The Feds want the grantees to succeed---they want to see good results and report these to the legislature. I would advise anyone with a federal grant to take advantage of any technical assistance, training, and other opportunities provided to support you.

*MKE: What advice would you give to an organization on managing a federal grant once they have received it?*

BZH: Remember to take grant reporting just as seriously as you took the grant writing process. Do what you are supposed to do and when you are supposed to do it. Rather than thinking of it as "something you have to do for the Feds," think of it as a great opportunity to take stock and assess your progress. In addition to sharing your success stories, remember to be forthcoming with what's not working. Use any technical support and the good relationship you've established with your Federal Project Officer (the FPO) to help you overcome any challenges.

# Grants and Requests for Proposals By Susan Murphy

Finding appropriate funding opportunities can be time consuming. Knowing the right place for your organization to look can be challenging. To aid in your search, The Improve Group has identified the following funders with upcoming grants and opportunities. **Application Tip:** An advisable first step for an applicant is a brief letter of inquiry to the funder. This step will conserve time and allow for a preliminary response regarding the possibility of support before submitting a full proposal. If you would like more helpful tips on applying for grants or information on locating funding prospects please contact Susan Murphy at [susan@theimprovetgroup.com](mailto:susan@theimprovetgroup.com).

## Upcoming deadlines:

**The Minnesota State Arts Board (MSAB)** mission involves serving as a leading catalyst for creating a healthy environment for the arts that fosters broad public participation in, and support for, the arts in Minnesota; promoting artistic excellence and preserving the diverse cultural heritage of the people of Minnesota through its support of artists and organizations; acting as a responsible steward of the public trust and working with the statewide network of regional arts councils to ensure accessibility to arts activities for all Minnesotans.

The Arts Board has four main granting programs, three of which are currently in an interim term and will not be issuing new grants until 2007. The Series Presenters program is in a current granting round. Grants are open to nonprofit presenting organizations, or presenters affiliated with colleges, universities, schools, or governmental units in Minnesota

that have at least two consecutive years of programming experience. Interested parties may apply for a project grant to support a series of public performances, exhibitions, or screenings in the visual, performing, or literary arts. A series must include three or more events within a one year period, and have an annual budget of at least \$12,000. Application deadline is March 15, 2006. For more information please contact an Arts Board Program Officer at [msab@arts.state.mn.us](mailto:msab@arts.state.mn.us).

## Multiple deadlines:

**The Grotto Foundation, Inc.**, established in December 1964, is dedicated to benefiting society by improving the education and the economic, physical, and social well-being of citizens, with a special focus on families and culturally diverse groups. The Foundation is further interested in increasing public understanding of American cultural heritage, the cultures of nations, and the individual's responsibility to

fellow human beings. To Apply: Minnesota Common Grant Applications are available from the Minnesota Council on Foundations Web: [www.mcf.org](http://www.mcf.org) or the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits Web: [www.mncn.org](http://www.mncn.org). Submit your completed application materials to the Grotto offices by one of the following application deadline dates: January 15 April, March 15 June; July 15 October; November 15 February.

## Continuing Opportunities with no deadlines:

**The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation** is a philanthropic nonprofit institution established in 1934 by Alfred Pritchard Sloan, Jr., then President and Chief Executive Officer of the General Motors Corporation. The Foundation's programs and interests fall into the following areas: Science and Technology; Standard of Living and Economic Performance; Education and Careers in Science and Technology; Selected National Issues; and The Civic Program.

Each area of interest is assigned a Program Director who may be contacted directly for additional information about a specific program. To Apply Grant requests can be made at any time for support of activities related to Foundation program areas and interests. The Foundation is generally limited to supporting tax-exempt organizations and there are no deadlines or standard forms. The Foundation accepts proposals sent by e-mail at [www.sloan.org/main.shtml](http://www.sloan.org/main.shtml).

Sloan Trustees meet four times a year to consider proposals. Officer grants are also made at any time by the Foundation. These grants enable the Foundation to respond quickly to proposals for many activities, such as workshops, symposia, and conferences that fall within its program areas and interests. This can be helpful for the preliminary planning and exploratory stages of major projects. Historically, these grants have ranged from \$500 to \$45,000.



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